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M. L. Vardy
(P. T)

A Peculiar Hero

Manny made the last arrangements for the burial of his mother and only then did he finally sit down to rest and ate something. The corpse had been lying there for several days before he could make up his mind to notify all those he had to inform, even though he was aware that the Jewish ritual law called for burying the dead within 24 hours. What he was primarily trying to delay was the notification of his sisters and the extended family. He feared that his sisters would immediately take over the control over the ceremony and his dead mother and he would be shunted aside.

In recent months, actually for the whole last year, he had devoted his life increasingly to his rapidly declining mother. She had been in her nineties, almost totally blind and of increasingly clouding mind and senses. During this last year he has kept the rest of the family away in order to have her all for himself. The sisters tried, of course, everything in their power to gain access to their mother in her last months. They were upset and suspected their brother of attempting to exclude them from her inheritance. While this suspicion may not have been altogether untrue, they had been totally blind to his more important other, non-material motives. They thought the worst of him because he had been engaged in a messy feud with one of them, accusing his brother- in- law of robbing his parents in a partnership.

He tried to involve the community public opinion of the congregation against his respectable brother in law, and ended up alienating his whole extended family.

In the feud of an oddball outsider against a pillar of his religious community, Manny, of course, wound up the loser.

This was only the crowning feud in a series of preceding ones in Manny's life when he would take on respectable authority figures accusing them, with more or less justification, of shortchanging him with larcenous acts.

II

The peak period in Manny's life came about during the Nazi takeover of his country. He performed a role during this period, which stunned all his acquaintances and vindicated him in the eyes of all his former critics in his family, his father foremost among them.

While most other Jews in the city were in mortal fear for their lives and felt the ground to open up under their feet, Manny felt an unaccustomed self-confidence and elation, as if the oppressive shackles of his former existence fell from him, as from a liberated prisoner.

One of his neighborhood pals had a brother Mishka, a parachutist sergeant, who was home on leave from the Russian front. This was two years after Stalingrad, the Germans and their Hungarian allies were now fighting a defensive battle of retreat. Mishka decided to desert and not to return to the murderous battlefields, where tenth of thousands of his comrades had alredy fallen or been captured by the Russians.

Mishka needed civilian clothes and money which Manny agreed to supply, provided Mishka gave him his papers and his uniform.

Manny used for this trade a big part of the money his father gave him for emergencies, before the family had parted. The new identity of the dashing uniform and papers lent him a self confidence he had never known before in his life. While the life of the Jews in the town was increasingly constricted, Manny went around in his new uniform and identity as the king of the hill. Of course, he had enough sense to change residence, taking a room in a neighborhood where he was not known.

He soon learned that his new papers were potentially as dangerous as the Jewish ones, since without papers legitimizing his absence from his unit he was liable at any time to be picked up as a deserter. He also found through the same friends the address of a print shop which for the right price was willing to replicate any official government form. He had them first produce for him blanks of Marching Orders, legitimizing his absence from his unit on the front. The replication of the requisite rubber stamps for the documents was then relatively easy.

He soon realized that he had hit upon a gold mine; in those times there was an inexhaustible market for forged papers saving people's lives.

Usually he demanded the maximum price that his panicky potential buyers could afford, but at other times, when the spirit moved him, he also exercised occasional generosity. This then boosted his sense of godlike powers, as the ruler over life and death.

When the initial decrees came out about the concentrating of the Jews in the capital in ghetto like houses, his mother and sisters fled to the provinces with forged gentile papers. These were times when only acts of extraordinary daring,

which would seem reckless in ordinary times, would do to save a person's life. People bound by their habits as law abiding citizens of he country which now persecuted them, had little chance of survival.

During one of his visits to the old neighborhood without his uniform, Manny learned that the cover of his mother and sisters in the provinces was blown and they were now interned in a camp, awaiting deportation to Germany. The rest of the Jews in the country in the countryside had already been deported to concentration camps in Germany. Manny decided making a risky visit to that camp. By this time Manny had felt little toward members of his family other then resentment or hatred, but when it came to his mother he preserved for her a soft spot in his heart, which prompted him to this reckless move. But to reflect about his own motives was definitely not his habit; any such reflection would have just made him uncomfortable.

When he reached the internment camp he soon found out that his family's transport to Germany was scheduled for the next day. Because of the turmoil, he couldn't get in to see them.

The events of the next day were preserved in his memory only as if through the cloud, as a dreamlike event. He was a gambler, who tended to put everything on one daring card.

He had with him a blank of Marching Orders on which he put his mother's and sisters' names, inventing the story that they were ordered to the capital for a military tribunal. His own arrogance in combination with the confusion and ignorance of the guards worked in his favor. All he could later remember that he made it safely with his family to the capital, where there still were pockets of the Jewish population in specially designated houses.

Once he safely deposited his family in one of the relatively safe houses under the nominal protection of the Swiss embassy, he realized that the utility of his parachutist uniform had reached its end. The ring of Russian troops was gradually closing around the capital, and the city was flooded by deserters and patrolling military police, which made their lives of deserters as dangerous as that of the Jews.

III

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embassies, the Swedish and the Swiss served as the only available "defense" of the remaining Jewish population against the murdering Hungarian Nazi commando troops.

It was when Manny deposited his mother and sisters in one of the Swiss protected houses, that he hit upon the idea to "appoint" himself the secretary of the embassy. He had found out that there was no secretary in residence at the embassy at this point in time. The real secretary had not returned to the besieged city from his vacation in his homeland.

He was so emboldened by his previous success as the parachutist sergeant, that he didn't even bother to change his German sounding real last name, he only changed his first name to the more Germanic sounding Wilhelm. His naivete and lack of experience in such matters had turned to his advantage, since they allowed him to be blissfully unaware of the possible pitfalls of his alias. His commnad of German was far from perfect, only serviceable, but -to his luck- it was only rarely tested in conversation with German or Swiss natives. The ones he had to primarily impress were the Hungarian Nazi military commandos, who were in charge of the city besieged by the Russian troops, whose German was much inferior to Manny's.

The Hungarian Jews, upon whom he bestowed the life saving benefits of the forged Swiss letters of protection, did not care to check his credentials.

During this most heroic stage of his transformation, he showed up at times in the most dangerous situations in the besieged town and saved the lives of hundreds of the persecuted with his magical "passport of protections". Manny usually didn't demand money for the vital papers he distributed. He only graciously accepted donations from some of the more affluent among the recipients.

During this chaotic, but for him dreamlike period Manny exceeded himself and reached the peak of his existence. All his later life he has tried in vain to replicate that period but he never even came close.

III

Manny was the first born and the only male of three children. His father, a wartime- junior grade officer of the monarchy and a ex- prisoner-of-war in Siberia, struggled between jobs as a taxi driver and sales clerk, when he had a job at all. The economic depression hit shortly after Manny's birth and the exclusionary anti Jewish laws made survival difficult. His father's matura and high school education qualified him as a middle class gentleman, yet his economic status pushed him into the ranks of the working class. Both parents worked, trying

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to eke out a living in this border area between middle-class respectability and working class poverty.

The mother was a frustrated, bitter person, embittered against the world and her own sisters, who fared better in life despite her own superior intelligence. She felt entitled to more than her life of deprivation and poverty.

A skinny, tallish, unhappy boy, growing up in a bleak, working class apartment building, Manny was a disappointment to his parents, who had once seen in him their main hope for the future. To the disappointment of his mother, Manny was barely mediocre at school.

When he was caught in one of his frequent self-aggrandizing but harmless fibs, his father would take off his leather belt and meet out brutal punishment. Later on, when his father caught Manny in minor thefts of money, the punishment was even fiercer. He had now threatened the last remaining asset his father cherished: the family's name. His son will become a thief! The humiliations engendered in the boy a hatred of his father and all authority figures.

Yet his father had at least periods, on weekends when he was not in the punishing mood, but accessible and jovial, while the mother's attitude of bitter frustration was constant. The boy made few friends among his class mates in the Jewish school where his parents sent him. His friends were working class boys in his apartment building, partners in some dangerous youthful pranks. His parents disapproved of these friends during his childhood, but they eventually proved life saving.

IV

After the war the family came to the USA with many other survivors of the Holocaust, where they restarted their lives with other members of their extended family in a strictly religious Jewish neigborhood.

The first serious breach in his ties to the ultra religious community of his family occurred when he divorced his wife after less than a year of marriage.

Actually, his marriage existed only formally; he entered it only after repeated urgings of his family, motivated also by his own wish to attain respectability. A person of marriageable age was not considered a full member in this community unless married. He dreaded the sexual intimacy of married life, but embarked upon it hoping, that he would be able to get used to it like everybody else.

Reality for him was as bad as expected. Becky, his young wife was as inexperienced in sex as he was; he found the fumbling intimate physical contact with this stranger in his bed outright embarrassing. When she expressed also her need for personal attention, or even love, Manny found himself totally out of his depth. This was more than he had bargained for; he felt unjustly besieged. He thought that by giving his wife her weekly allowance he had fulfilled the main function that could reasonably be expected from a husband. Hadn't, the function of breadwinner been the main area were his father had fallen short of his mother's expectations as a husband?

For a year after his marriage failed Manny continued in the profession he had worked till then, as a cantor, but he found his existence dreary.

He was lonely and isolated; he felt a vague dissatisfaction and unhappiness, the source of which he was unable to pinpoint. He craved for glory and acclaim beyond those his current job could provide. He longed for some of the thrills and excitements of his adolescence during the Nazis in Hungary, when he had reached the peak of his life.

When an admirer from the congregation compared him to a famous opera singer he conceived of the plan to become an opera singer.

V.

His trip to Italy, where he was to pursue his artistic training, put a continent between himself and his skeptical family and failed marriage. The favorable exchange rate between the Italian Lira and the Dollar at that time allowed him to stretch his savings further.

In a year Manny acquired a good command of the language. He went through a number of voice teachers, because some of them were not appreciative of his talent, others- he thought- were jealous of it. Initially, to avoid the final negative conclusion as long as he could, he just shelved the idea of a stage career. By the end of the second year, however, he could not avoid the realization, that the dream of a career in the stage was not in his reach.

He managed, however, to revive there his love of thrills and adventure. He got involved in some shady deals smuggling pictures to Switzerland. Initially he managed to make a nice sum of money, but eventually his lack of knowledge in art tripped him up. When some characters sold him a number of worthless pictures as valuable art, he fell into the trap and lost everything.

VII

After his mother's death Manny had lingered on for a short while in the neighbourhood, only to disappear totally from the life of everybody who knew him. There were some unsubstantiated rumors that he had killed himself, but others argued that such a thing would have been totally alien to his style. But it is likely that he just hid in a hole to finish his days like a sick animal or a person who has nothing left to live for, trying to deny his enemies the sight of his demise.

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VII

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